THE OTHER PRODIGAL

March 5, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 15:11-32

"But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him..." -Luke 15:28 (RSV)

Jimmy Carter wrote a book last year, An Outdoor Journal, about his life-long love affair with nature and his experiences hunting and fishing. In an early chapter President Carter describes how as a young lad he learned to fish with his father who he characterizes as tough but fair and generous and fun-loving. He tells about his most memorable fishing experience...

"Late one afternoon, after a good day of fishing, Daddy called me over and asked me to keep his string of fish while he went up the river to talk to one of his friends. I tied it on with mine on the downstream side of me while I kept fishing, enjoying the steady pull of the current on our day's catch. It wasn't long before I watched my cork begin to move slowly and steadily up under a snag and knew I had hooked a big one. After a few minutes I had a large copperhead bream in my hands, but as I struggled with it and wondered how I was going to hold the fish while untying the stringer, a cold chill went down my spine. I realized that the tugging of the current on the stringers was gone, as were all our fish! My belt loop had broken.

"I threw my pole up on the nearest sand bar and began to dive madly into the river below where I had been standing.

"Then I heard Daddy's voice calling my nickname, 'Hot,' he said, 'what's wrong?'

"'I've lost the fish, Daddy.'

"'All of them? Mine too?'

"'Yes, sir.' I began to cry, and the tears and water ran down my face together each time I came up for breath.

"Daddy was rarely patient with foolishness or mistakes. But after a long silence, he said, 'Let them go.' I stumbled out on the bank, and he put his arms around me.

"It seems foolish now, but at that time it was a great tragedy for me. We stood there for a while, and he said, 'There are a lot more fish in the river. We'll get them tomorrow.' I worshipped him."

There are few experiences in this life that are as powerful, as redemptive, as unexpected love, undeserved acceptance, unmerited patience. When they happen to us we are occasionally shattered by them and frequently changed for the better. Religion would call them experiences of grace although they often happen outside the perimeters of institutional religion. The Christian religion suggests that these experiences of grace are very much at the heart of the matter. That whenever and however they happen to us, they are illustrative of, and contain something of the reality of, the fundamental truth that the relationship between human beings and their creator has to be, and always is, one of pure grace.

The subject came up one time when Jesus of Nazareth had been associating with so many disreputable characters that it was slowly driving the respectable religious people crazy. "If you are God's man," they asked him, "how can you associate with this riff-raff, these ne'er-do-wells, these bums?"

Now, there were many traditional reasons for a man purporting to be on God's side to keep his distance from the infectious, unclean and demeaning company of people who didn't know or much care about which side of God they were on. The religious tradition, simply put, was that you get on God's good side by doing good things, obeying the law, being religious. And you were clearly not on God's side if you neglected these good deeds or did bad things. You were a sinner. You had no standing with God, no money in the bank, as it were. Jesus seems to have spent a lot of time with the sinners. The good folk wondered why and so he told them a triology of stories which together may be the best short stories ever told.

The first one is about a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep and goes after the one sheep who is lost. The second story is about a woman who turns her household upside down and inside out looking for one lost coin. And then an extended story with three of the most memorable and timeless characters in all of literature.

The Prodigal Son is the name by which we know it, but I try not to use that name because the younger son, the prodigal of tradition, is just one of three characters in the story and I conclude no more important and probably less relevant than the other two. I am, in fact, a father and an older brother. My good friend, Professor Eric Dean at Wabash College, wrote:

"If I am to fit myself into this story at all, it will have to be as the older brother. No sluggard he, no prodigal... hard-working, reliable... the salt of the earth... the pillar of the community... the very-nearly indispensable person." [The Good News About Sin, p. 45] Sounds like a Presbyterian to me; a good prospect for a church officer.

The younger brother gets all the press, most of the sermonic attention and a good share of the artistic expression. That moment of reunion is portrayed magnificently in art. Listen to the New Yorker describe how George Ballanchine choreographed it and Edward Villela directs it - as dance:

"The Father comes out of his tent and walks to a point downstage where he stops and faces his son, who hesitates, then lifts his hands, palms upward, pleadingly... once, twice, still no response. The Son turns and retreats. On the high note of the flute melody, the Father holds out his hand. With bent back and both hands as if tied behind him, the Son creeps forward, straightening himself gradually until he is close enough to fall full length at his father's feet. Then gripping the man's ankles he pulls himself underneath him. All this time the Father stands motionless, and he remains motionless as the Son hauls himself up. Then on the last, low horn note of the score, the Father gently covers the boy with his cloak." [11/28/88, p. 58]

That's unusually powerful drama. The reunion between prodigal and parent needs no words to adorn its primal power. But, the truth of the matter is that while the young prodigal gets all the press, has the most fun, gets a parable named after him, you and I really ought to pay attention to that elder sibling for whom the outcome is very different, and whose behavior and style is much more like our own.

The most helpful resource I ever read on this story was written by a professor at the Near Eastern School of Theology in Beirut. Dr. Kenneth Bailey approaches the parable through the eyes of the Palestinian peasants, for whose edification they were originally told. The exercise is fascinating.

The young son does something absolutely unheard of when he asks for his share of the estate. It is presumptuous in the extreme. It is the equivalent of saying - "Hurry up and die. I can't wait to get mine. Furthermore, as soon as I get it I intend to sell it, thus depriving you of your own insurance and security." What this young man does is so callous, so terrible, we really don't identify with it. It was an extraordinary insult to his family: an absolute break - also with the community. He is indeed lost for even thinking like this.

His father does not respond in anger or hurt, but by granting the request, endangering his own welfare and humiliating himself in the eyes of his neighbors.

Meanwhile there is a detail here that gets lost. The father actually gives both sons their share of the estate. The older brother gets his too. He is supposed to refuse; in fact, he is supposed to be a peacemaker, to try to talk sense to his little brother. His silence is pregnant.

So, the young son goes to a far country, has a great time, spends all the money, is reduced to manual labor and eating pig food - and has a change of heart, which is hardly a great moral break-through. He simply decides to go home where there is at least food on the table. He proposes to

return not as son, but as servant. He'll work for his father, pay off the debt, live in the village with the other hired hands. His salvation is still in his own hands. He'll put things right himself.

What happens next is astonishing. The people hearing the parable are thoroughly enjoying the mounting tension. Here he comes down the road, tail between his legs, eating crow. He thought he was so smart. He was such an insufferable know-it-all... Always was spoiled. Good. Hope the old man makes him stand outside for a while. What these people know the offended father will do is wait, like the father in the ballet, silently in wounded dignity, for his flagrantly disrespectful son to make full confession. Then, after an appropriate silence, to say something like, "I told you so. I told you something like this would happen. You can come home but remember the lesson you just learned." It's delicious actually, so wonderfully self-righteous. Is there anything as satisfying as to be able to say, "I told you so?"

So, the hearers are astonished when the father sees his son from a distance, recognizes the shape of him and does something dignified men never do - picks up his robes and runs down the road. Before the startled son has a chance to say a word, the father throws his arms around him, embraces him, kisses him. And then in the midst of the joyful tears the son tries to blurt out his carefully rehearsed confession; he never even gets to the part about working as a hired hand, because his father made him a son again. (Who needs another servant? I want my son!)... and he is already snapping out orders for the homecoming party. A big one, no goat or lamb but a calf, enough for a hundred people. The whole village - in front of whom the father humiliated himself with this extraordinary love, this foolish running to the son who had made him look so ridiculous, the whole village is coming to the party for the son whose father's love now protects him and reunites him.

It is in the middle of this extraordinarily happy occasion that the father is humiliated again. Someone is missing. Everyone can see it. He was supposed to be the host, make the first toast, sit at his father's right hand. His absence is a gross public insult to his father.

So, for the second time that day, the old man comes out to find a lost child. And when he finds him the encounter is bitter, full of resentment that has been burning for a long time. In fact, he's been waiting, savoring the thought of an occasion when he can say, "I've been slaving away for years and you never did anything like this for me." And he literally spits out his hatred. "But when this son of yours who threw away your money comes home, you reward him."

Again, the listeners know the father will put this son in his place, respond with righteous fury at this profound insult, or at the very least, tell the son to "shut up and get inside, pronto, and we'll talk about it later." And again, unexpected grace - "Son, you are always with me, all that I have is yours, but your brother was dead and is alive... Come home now."

And then the older brother says, "Father, I have sinned. I've been in this far country of bitterness for so long. I've been there since he

was born. It's no good here. I'm coming home." And they embrace with tears of joy and arm in arm join son and brother at the banquet table. That's the way it ought to conclude. But it doesn't. The curtain drops on this drama with that older brother, or older sister, still standing out in the field, in a far country, cut of from his family, by his own stubbornness and pride.

Can you find yourself in there? My friend Eric Dean said he saw himself in that elder brother, hard-working, respectable, but capable of self-righteousness and destructive pride. Dean went on to say that he saw lots of older brother behavior in our culture - in the typical middle class attitudes about welfare recipients. "We work hard, pay our bills, pay taxes, it isn't fair." And our attitudes toward refugees, aliens, homeless people, who seem to be perennial recipients of government generosity for which we pay.

Dean, who is himself an immigrant, taught always that each of us is here by grace, that none of us earns it all alone, or deserves what we have. Even if you pay full price for your private liberal arts education at Wabash, he used to say, someone else is footing a significant part of the bill and you are receiving something you did not earn.

Ann James, writing in the Christian Century, observes that "The older son speaks for all responsible, loyal, religious people who don't cause trouble and who live prudently, who are so often asked to sacrifice for someone else's sin. The older son's anger is reasonable and righteous. And wrong" [see "Prodigiously Lost and Found," in the Christian Century, 3/1/89]

Wrong because that angry, self-righteousness is a product of the same sin that prompted the younger brother to leave home. Wrong because to wallow in bitterness toward parents, brothers, sisters, friends, God - is to live in self-imposed exile. Local psychologist, Alan Richardson, has written a brief essay in which the father says to his first child, "My son, you have gone off into this far country and don't even know it. Come home. Yours is the most difficult journey. But I pray that you will make it."

The younger son's confession is easy compared to this one. It is far more difficult to see and confess the stubborn pride that keeps us apart, that breaks our most precious relationships, than it is to acknowledge flagrant misbehavior; far more difficult to see and acknowledge that my ego, my self-centerdness, is the reason we aren't getting along. That's why Jesus leaves this son out in the field. Because the very people he's talking to don't see it in themselves. They are so caught up in their own selves, and the fact that Jesus is spending time with their social inferiors, that they can't even see that this attitude is keeping them away from the banquet table of God. They can't see that the father running down the road and trudging out to the field is really a picture of God; that voluntary shouldering of the responsibility, that acceptance of the pain, is exactly what Jesus himself is doing and will do with unspeakable eloquence when he walks down the road to Jerusalem and dies.

It's tough because the very pride that makes us what we are prevents us from letting go and simply throwing ourselves into the open arms of the

one who comes after us. Tough because our sin is not flagrant. Tough because we are achievers. We are proud of our ability to earn it on our own, whatever it is. We are experts at hard work, at making ourselves indispensable. We are very good at feeling adequate and self-sufficient. And sometimes the incredible grace simply doesn't make much sense. Even our confessions are driven. Even our humility has a competitive edge to it.

In this shattering story the repentance which allows healing and homecoming to occur is not driven at all. It is not a long list of misdeeds. In fact, it is quite the opposite. It is a letting go, a letting go of that primal pride that assures me that I am sufficient, that I can take care of it, even my salvation. That is so alien to me, to you, that I need to hear it again. Repentance is not a recital of sinful deeds; it is a letting go of pride and a turning over to God the job of saving me and redeeming me, of making me a member of God's family, God's child again.

You can be religious all your life without hearing the Good News. You can be obsessively devout with the result that you move further and further away from the banquet table of the Lord into the far country of bitterness and self-righteousness.

There is a sense in which words run out because we are now talking about that most intimate and profound encounter between our God and ourselves. In the story there are no words spoken. The prodigal tries to make his speech and stops. It isn't enough. Instead he allows himself to be pulled into the welcoming embrace of the father - the mother - it doesn't matter.

When words are no longer adequate, I have always turned to music, to the great music of the faith. Two hymns convey this shattering grace...

"I greet thee, who my sure Redeemer art" from a hymnal John Calvin edited... Calvin, that consummate intellect, that thorough, brittle, cheerless scholastic... humming the music of grace!

> "Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness,
> no harshness hast thou and no bitterness:
> O grant to us the grace we find in thee,
> that we may dwell in perfect unity."

But particularly, I love "Lord of all hopefulness." I discovered this hymn in what is called a Welcoming Worship Service at the Abbey on the Island of Iona, off the coast of Scotland. It was after a difficult and demanding week of physical and mental work at a Peace Community in Northern Ireland, knowing every day that we are not always adequate to the tasks of life; that pray and work and try as we might, there are things which simply exceed our ability, our time, our energy. And that in order to keep trying, keep caring about something as remote and difficult as peace, we have to let go of it, have to acknowledge our own inadequacy. In the final analysis that's true about each of us and our own salvation... We aren't going to get it done on our own.

"Lord of all kindliness, Lord of all grace,
your hands swift to welcome, your arms to embrace,
be there at our homing, and give us, we pray,
your love in our hearts, Lord, at the eve of the day."

There are no words adequate or necessary when you and I decide to return from the far country. It's more a letting go than anything else; more an allowing ourselves to be embraced by the one who comes down the road or out into the field to find us and to welcome us home.

Praise and all glory to that one, our Lord and our God.
Amen.

3/5/89